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THE APPEAL OF THE RELIGIOUS PRESS

BY H. K. CARROLL

IT should be obvious, even to the superficial observer, that the religious press is necessary to the plans, purposes and enterprises of the organizations known collectively as the Christian Church, and individually as religious bodies or denominations. The denominational system which characterizes the branch of Christianity known as Protestantism makes a denominational press indispensable. If there were one Protestant Church as there is one Roman Catholic Church, the problem would be simplified, but the necessity would not be removed. Not long ago, the National Welfare Council, acting for the Roman Catholic Church, conducted a campaign to increase the circulation of the Roman Catholic press. In doing so it gave six reasons why a Catholic press is necessary, the chief of which is that the secular newspaper does not serve its Catholic readers with news of Catholic institutions, organizations, movements and events. It manifestly could not do this for one denomination without doing it for all. It could not give the space for all, it could not discuss denominational questions, and its staff is not fitted for this kind of work. It might be added that most dailies have no consistent plan of dealing with current religious events. They may report one or two sessions of an ecclesiastical convention, or synod, quite fully, and neglect the rest. One can never be sure that the accounts given will be either adequate or intelligent. Therefore, said the National Welfare Council, there must be a Catholic press, and the welfare of the Church requires that this press should go into every Catholic family. Other denominations would with equal conviction hold to the necessity of a denominational press, and the reasons are too obvious to call for discussion.

How far short the Catholic press falls of the ideal condition of a copy in each of the estimated four million Catholic homes is indicated in the appeal referred to. Only about a million homes

receive, we are told, a Catholic journal, or one-fourth of the whole number. This sums up fairly well the reasons for the existence of the religious press of Protestant denominations. The difference in faith, in church polity, discipline, form of worship, in no wise affects the necessity of the appeal of each religious body to its own constituency. The same conditions which lead to the establishment of art, scientific, industrial, trade, and other class publications operate in the religious world to create and continue denominational journals. Scarcely any denomination, however small and insignificant, is without its own organ to present the reasons for its existence and to advocate its principles.

Denominationalism is still very strong, notwithstanding the various movements for Christian unity which have been launched from time to time, and Councils or Conferences for co-operation which have been formed, as the Evangelical Alliance, whose successor, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, has carried interdenominational fellowship and co-operation to its most advanced stage by an organization embracing thirty or more Evangelical denominations having an aggregate of twenty million church members or communicants. The Faith and Order Movement, launched by the Protestant Episcopal Church, and aiming at world-wide organic union, has its hope fixed upon a Conference to be held in the not distant future. The initiative in 1919, taken by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, for an organization in which Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, Friends, Lutherans and other bodies of diverse polities, principles, practices and creeds, were to be brought together in a sort of Federal Union, preserving their own histories, names, forms of organizations, confessions, and even methods of work, has been abandoned by its own proponent, with its value as an experiment unascertained.

Nor can it be said that organic union of members of the same group, as Presbyterian and Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, etc., where differences are few and agreements many, has had much success. A small body of Baptists and a smaller body of Presbyterians have merged with other family members. The one notable achievement in reversing the process of division

has been in the Lutheran communion, where three considerable English-speaking bodies united, a few years ago, in forming the United Lutheran Church in America, and three Norwegian organizations were securely welded into one.

The chief Presbyterian and Reformed bodies, though friendly enough for co-operation and fellowship, cannot quite consent to surrender their independence and separate entities; and a like fear of being swallowed up and losing their particular identities prevents the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, from returning to the united state from which they were separated when slavery was a burning question three-quarters of a century ago.

The particular bearing which this question of organic union has upon the condition of the religious press is that there are too many of these papers. If the number of denominations were reduced, the number of organs could be reduced, and the weak, unattractive, inefficient, which serve no useful purpose, could be retired. As an illustration, the United Lutheran Church in America is now represented by one strong, able, influential paper, where three or more used to compete. As a matter of fact a Lutheran weekly printed on calendered paper, in good type, with a variety of contributed articles and strong, vigorous editorials, is not unwelcome to non-Lutheran readers, for in these days the denominational barriers are not so high that Methodists and Presbyterians and Lutherans may not see what is going on beyond their own enclosures, and be quite willing to add a paper of another denomination to their own.

Now having suggested that the multiplicity of denominations, every one of which insists upon a denominational organ to vindicate its existence, accounts for many journals too weak to perform any useful function, and that organic union is the only salvation of scores of useless and decaying denominations, let me show

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of papers</i>	<i>Aggregate circulation</i>
1880.....	268	2,091,866
1890.....	337	3,061,076
1900.....	410	4,805,433
1910.....	398	7,020,027
1920.....	354	7,000,923

something of the history of the religious press of the United States in the last forty years. The story of its growth in number and circulation is graphically told in the preceding condensed table.

The increase in the number of these journals does not mean an increase of power and influence; it is to the gain in average circulation to which we must look for greater effectiveness, and this was small, being only 1,300 in the first ten years and 2,600 in the second. When the number of papers began to decrease after 1900 the average circulation ran up to 17,638 in 1910 and to 19,776 in 1920. This increase in average circulation was in the face of a loss in the number of journals of 12 in 1910 and 44 in 1920. Unfortunately, the evolutionary process of the survival of the fittest probably did not determine the continued life of some of these papers, but an appeal to denominational pride, or the granting of a denominational subvention. That is to say, some denominational papers representing particular localities, or constituencies, or races, or causes, are published at a loss, which is made good out of the excess of incomes of other periodicals belonging to the same publishers. Some of the larger denominations have this system of an official press. The Methodist Episcopal Church has an official publishing house, with publishing agents and editors elected by its General Conference and responsible to it. Certain other denominations are served by both official and independent periodicals.

Whether official denominational control tends to develop, or to hinder, the self-support and healthy growth of the periodicals whose deficits are covered from the general publication income, or whether editorial freedom of utterance is or is not hampered, is not, so far as the Methodist Episcopal Church itself is concerned, a matter of much discussion. The editors would affirm, one and all, that they are under no other control or hint of control as to the expression of editorial opinion on any subject than that of their consciences and common sense. And so far as their journals bear witness it is to the exercise of editorial freedom. The only instance of pressure brought to bear upon an official editor to resign was in the late war and concerned a German periodical. His opinions were contrary not only to the loyal attitude of the Church, but to the feeling of the majority

of his German constituency. The incident was quietly settled and another German editor appointed. Of course, such a change would take place under any kind of ownership or control. However, the argument that an official editor will be influenced, either consciously or unconsciously, by the judgment of the body which holds the power of his official life in its hands, cannot perhaps be conclusively answered. But it is only fair to say that no Church is more effectively served than this by its group of a dozen or more official and semi-official weeklies.

The growth of the religious press in the forty years, by denominational groups, does not indicate any disposition to abandon this method of cultivating denominational loyalty, denominational enterprise and denominational prosperity. The Methodist group, including fifteen or more separate bodies, was served in 1880 by 39 papers with an aggregate circulation of 221,000. In the next ten years the circulation was more than doubled; it was doubled again in the period 1900-10, and in 1920, covering the war period, when scarcity of print paper and high cost of production reduced the number of publications, the total circulation again advanced by 269,000 to 1,415,000. These figures carry their own argument and enforce their own conclusion, which is that the denominational press is reaching six times as many Methodists as it did forty years ago.

The Baptist group, including fifteen separate bodies, had 24 papers in 1880, with 143,000 aggregate circulation; in 1900 it more than doubled the number of its papers and their aggregate circulation, and in 1920 it had 47 papers with an aggregate circulation of 459,000. This is not so favorable a showing as might have been expected. The Baptists have great popular strength. They have run side by side with the Methodist group, and are making prodigious strides, particularly in the South. The Southern Baptist Convention is by far the largest Protestant body in the South, with probably three and a quarter millions of members, having a million more than the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and being second only as a denomination to the Methodist Episcopal Church. That the Baptist press should have less than half a million average circulation among nearly 8,000,000 communicants, notwithstanding the fact that

their attachment to denominational doctrine, principles and practices is tenacious and their denominational loyalty intense, is a phenomenon for which I can offer no explanation.

The Presbyterian group, consisting of ten or more separate bodies, had more papers and a larger average circulation in 1880 than it had either ten or twenty years later. In 1910 with more papers, 26, the average circulation was more than double that of 1900. In the next ten years it lost ten papers and advanced in aggregate circulation to 454,000; nearly as large as that of the Baptists, for a group of much less than one-third of the Baptist numerical strength.

The Roman Catholic press has grown by leaps and bounds in the number and aggregate circulation of its press. Beginning with 44 papers in 1880, with 271,000 aggregate circulation, it advanced to 76 papers in 1900 and 819,000 circulation, crossing the million line in circulation in 1900 and increasing it to 1,367,000 in 1910. Of course the Roman Catholic constituency is polyglot in character and embraces many distinct European nationalities. It has grown immensely by immigration and now has a population, including communicants and baptized infants, of more than 18,000,000. Its press has gained not only in aggregate circulation, but in character and influence. One of its weeklies has a circulation of 50,000, another of 32,000 and a third of 27,500, ranking in this respect only a little under the three most widely circulated Methodist papers.

The Lutheran group, embracing many separate bodies, has developed a denominational press of growing power and influence, but with a combined circulation below that of the other groups mentioned. The two mergings of six Lutheran bodies into two compact organizations promise greatly increased effectiveness and enterprise.

I have left out of view so far the interdenominational press. These papers are generally well supported and some of them, which offer particular features of service, have attained a large and remunerative circulation. Members of the various Evangelical denominations are drawn to them because they neither exploit nor decry denominational interests, but endeavor to give a broad general survey of religious progress, and lend support

to interdenominational co-operation and Christian unity. They cannot, however, take the place, in the minds of the majority of ministers and church members, of their own denominational papers in the matter of denominational news and discussion of denominational policies and enterprises. Hence as long as denominations endure, the denominational press will probably continue.

The daily newspaper will equally hold its place in Christian minds as the purveyor of the news of the day from the wide world, and no one is more interested in the events in other continents and nations than the alert minister and church member, because in these days of missionary enterprise in all lands, progress in Christian civilization is the natural outcome, as they believe, of missionary work, and they have the world vision and interpret events in other hemispheres in the light of their faith in the Divine formative Providence. And the omniscient editor of the morning or evening newspaper may have little or no knowledge and less sympathy with this dream.

More than this, ministers and church members are greatly interested in moral and governmental reforms and believe that the evils of society should be fought and overthrown. They developed a conscience against slavery and the lottery and rejoiced in their overthrow; they inaugurated and conducted a campaign against the drink evil until prohibition came, and there are other reforms which they are prosecuting for the benefit of humanity. The great newspapers are not always friendly to these reforms; but the religious press serves faithfully in creating and strengthening sentiment against public evils.

I am aware that there is a general impression that the religious press is not the power that it used to be in leadership and the shaping of religious opinion. This belief may be due, in some measure, to the fact that certain notable changes have taken place in its editorial control. Those whose memory runs back to the days when eminent denominational leaders were in the editorial chair, and made their journals personal organs, may easily conclude that there has been a decline in editorial leadership because these well-known editors have passed off the stage of action, and their successors do not advertise themselves. But this is the day of impersonal editorship, not only in the religious

but also in the daily press. A generation ago leading Church papers were edited as though they were personal organs. There was Dr. S. I. Prime, Presbyterian divine, whose genial and commanding personality made the dual departments of *The New York Observer*, the secular and the religious, one for week day and the other for Sunday reading, welcome in thousands of homes; and its opinions were quoted, not as those of the paper, but as those of the wise and erudite Dr. Prime. And there was Dr. Henry M. Field, of the brilliant Stockbridge family, which gave to the country great lawyers, father and son, a United States Supreme Court Justice, a financier and cable-layer, as well as an eminent divine. Dr. Field had a genius for the pen and made *The Evangelist* an attractive personal organ. Dr. Henry M. Dexter was, in those days, *The Congregationalist*, and *The Congregationalist* was Dr. Dexter. Drs. Daniel Curry and J. M. Buckley gave successively intellectual strength and brilliance to *The Christian Advocate*, and men quoted them more than they quoted the paper. In this galaxy was also Dr. E. M. Bright, of *The Examiner*, whose virile, caustic pen fought opposing opinion and pointed the way to his Baptist followers; and the coruscating T. DeWitt Talmage, whose sermons read like novels, carried *The Christian Herald* into sudden prominence, which it has managed to hold under its impersonal régime. Henry Ward Beecher gave tone and brilliance to *The Independent*, which Theodore Tilton, in a brief meteoric career, changed by subtracting the tone and maintaining the brilliance.

These men are missed, just as the great personal editors of the daily press are missed. Horace Greeley and Whitelaw Reid, the Bennetts, Charles A. Dana, Henry Watterson and other shining lights, have disappeared from the firmament of journalism; but their successors in the editorial chairs, though they do not work in the blaze of personal publicity, make greater, steadier, stronger papers for the public. A personal journal is as strong and sound as its controlling editor and not more so, for if it has his strength and wisdom, it also partakes of his weaknesses and foibles.

The passing of personal journalism does not therefore indicate a decline. When Dr. Daniel Curry controlled by his great

personality the columns of *The Christian Advocate*, a half century ago, and fought the introduction of the lay element into the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, prominent laymen established an unofficial paper, *The Methodist*, which carried this important reform to success.

I do not believe that the religious press has declined in influence, but I do not say that it has improved very generally in character. A letter to me from the editor of an influential religious paper published in a Border State of the South, is quite frank in expressing his opinion: "While the religious newspapers of this country have done considerable good in the great work of carrying on our religious operations, I cannot believe that they have been any great power in our national life. Poverty and short-sighted policies with reference to our journalism, and a scant circulation, have kept our religious press on a secondary plane of influence. The idea of the value of publicity has never gripped the heart of our Evangelical Churches." He is, however, hopeful for the future, and sees indications that the Churches are beginning to develop a conscience concerning their periodicals, and he believes that in a few years, "we will look back and wonder that in the year 1922 the Evangelical Churches were practically content with the Church press as it was then."

The religious press has a difficult task to perform in the present generation. Anybody can see that change is the order of the day in religion as in government, in business, in commerce and industry, and in other human activities. Science has come with its passion for fact and with its discoveries, and philosophy is busy with theories and deductions based on scientific facts. Evolution as a working hypothesis is widely accepted in religious circles and modifies, if it does not actually change, belief. The exact methods of science are being applied to the interpretation of the Bible by a widening company of scholars. The New Testament as well as the Old is under the microscope and interpretations which the Fathers would have indignantly rejected are defended with increasing confidence. Old methods of evangelism are being abandoned, and in preaching emphasis is put on a different set of doctrines. It is true that many of these changes are not fundamental. The Deity, the sinlessness and the saving

power of Jesus Christ, the fact of sin and its corrupting power, the necessity of regeneration and of the building of a Christian character in accordance with the teachings of Christ, are still held and preached as great central doctrines; and Christian life, though it may seem far less strict in observance of certain rules and practices, measures up to a higher moral standard.

The religious press moves forward with the Church in all these things, and interprets for its constituency the newer and larger claims which society, the state and the nations collectively are making upon the Church. Its particular weakness lies in its lack of financial resources. Its golden future, if it is to have one, must be in that day when the process of reunion has reduced the multiplicity of denominations to, say, the original stocks of a single Presbyterian and Reformed body, one Baptist, one Methodist, one Lutheran and one Mennonite organization, instead of seventy. Then many superfluous denominational organs will die of inanition, and larger, stronger and more commanding periodicals will represent the chief Protestant divisions. This day is near the dawn, for the increasing demands for funds to finance the work of the Churches in their broadening fields of activity would compel consolidation of members of these and other groups as an economic measure alone, if other reasons were lacking. They are held apart more by the force of the fervid appeal to denominational loyalty to a proud history than by any serious differences in belief or practice. Meantime interdenominational journals may have increasing support and influence, if they can see and seize the opportunity.

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